Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
for
Native Fish Conservation in Wegner Creek
in the Missouri River Drainage

DECISION NOTICE

Region 4
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405-0901
June 8, 2017

Proposed Action

The proposed action would maintain a population of native Rocky Mountain Sculpin and develop a population of native westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) in Wegner Creek. The project involves enhancing a natural rock slab in Wegner Creek to create a waterfall barrier so fish cannot move upstream of that point. Rocky Mountain sculpin would be salvaged from upstream of the barrier site and held in a neighboring stream. Brook trout and rainbow trout upstream of the barrier would be removed with rotenone. Genetically pure adult westslope cutthroat trout from donor streams would be planted upstream of the barrier. Salvaged Rocky Mountain sculpin would be planted upstream of the barrier.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

FWP is required by Stature, Rule and policy to conduct an environmental assessment when proposing habitat/construction projects, fish removal projects and when stocking fish not indigenous to a waterbody. This assessment is accomplished through the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) of the proposed project was completed by FWP and released for public comment on May 5, 2017.

Public comments on the proposed project were accepted for 30 days from May 5, 2017 through June 5, 2017. A press release soliciting comments on the EA was released on May 10, 2017. The Great Falls Tribune printed a summary notice of the project on May 17, 2017. The draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicnotices/ on May 3, 2017.

Summary of Public Comment and FWP Response

One comment by phone was received on May, 31, 2017. Specific comments and FWP's responses follow:

Commenter 1

Topic 1 – Commenter expressed concerns with blasting on Wegner Creek and the risk of reducing stream flow. This commenter has over 25 years of history as a landowner on Wegner Creek and is 5.3 miles downstream of the proposed barrier site. The commenter said he has seen the stream go dry in his section and did not want to jeopardize further risk of dewatering.

Topic 2 -Commenter also raised concerns with using rotenone.

Topic 3 - Commenter raised concerns with removing brook trout and replacing with westslope cutthroat trout. He said he liked both species but preferred brook trout and specifically near Frazer Creek.

Topic 4 -Commenter raised questions about mink and herons eating brook trout in the lower part of Wegner Creek and asked for some clarification on westslope cutthroat trout that occur east of the continental divide.

FWP Response

1: The blasting was proposed to change a sloped rock slab into a vertical waterfall to prevent fish from moving upstream. We are not proposing to change the stream flow or channel direction. The blaster we consulted with is familiar with the properties of that rock, having blasted a lot of it NE of the commenters property. We believe there is little to no risk of changing flow patterns of the stream from blasting.

2. There is a long history of rotenone projects in Montana and specifically with projects in the near vicinity such as neighboring Tyrrell, Cottonwood and Elkhorn creeks. The evidence we have indicates rotenone was instrumental in achieving the goals of those projects and there are no long term impacts from using rotenone on those streams as evidenced by healthy, self-sustaining westslope cutthroat populations and insect communities.

3. Only about 0.5 mile of Wegner Creek on State land would be changed from brook trout and rainbow trout to westslope cutthroat trout. The remaining 4.1 miles of stream above that is located on private land or land administered by the BLM and leased by the same landowner. The project is about 2 miles upstream of Frazer Creek, so there should be no change in the abundance of brook trout downstream of the barrier.

4. During surveys conducted by FWP fisheries and wildlife staff over the past two years, no herons or mink have been observed in the Whitetail Prairie section of Wegner Creek or on the

private and BLM land in the upper drainage. This is most likely due to the higher elevation and abundant food sources in the lower drainage. In the 1950's fisheries taxonomists changed the nomenclature of black spotted trout to Yellowstone cutthroat trout and westslope cutthroat trout based on geographic distinction and genetic analysis. There are native westslope cutthroat trout in the island mountain ranges of central Montana as far east as the Snowy and Judith Mountains. FWP evidence suggests these are native aboriginal populations.

Additional information

On May 8, 2017 a cultural survey was conducted in the vicinity of the proposed barrier site and no cultural or archaeological resources were identified. The Montana State Historic Preservation issued a letter of concurrence on May 24, 2017.

Wegner Creek was gaged in multiple locations on May 8 and May 25, 2017. Measured flows ranged from 1.97 to 4.33 cfs at the barrier site. The stream flow was gaged downstream of the proposed barrier site which showed the tributaries provided an addition 17% stream flow that would contribute to dilution of water treated with rotenone and potassium permanganate. Flow measurements would continue throughout the summer of 2017 and prior to the proposed 2018 rotenone treatment to determine the range of possible flows and the accurate flow rate for administering rotenone and potassium permanganate.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comments, additional information and FWP's evaluation of the risks and benefits associated with the project, it is my decision to proceed with the Preferred Alternative (Alternative 2) to develop a fish passage barrier on Wegner Creek, salvage Rocky Mountain sculpin upstream of the barrier, remove non-native trout upstream of the barrier with rotenone, restock upstream of the barrier with Rocky Mountain sculpin and genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with the proposed action. Therefore, I conclude the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Gary Bertellotti
FWP Region 4 Supervisor

6/8/2017
Date